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Raaper, R., and Olssen, M. (2016) Mark Olssen on neoliberalisation of higher education and academic lives: an interview. *Policy Futures in Education*, 14(2), pp. 147-163.

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Deposited on: 22 August 2016

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## **Mark Olssen on Neoliberalisation of Higher Education and Academic Lives – an interview**

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### **Abstract**

This article is based on an interview conducted with Mark Olssen in October, 2014, and the subsequent discussions. These conversations invited Olssen to reflect on his experiences of neoliberalism as a practising academic who has worked in the UK for some 14 years, and also to comment as a researcher and writer who is well known for his work on neoliberalism, especially in relation to higher education policy. While focusing on a question of how neoliberalism has changed the context in which academics work, following Olssen's lead in his own research, in this interview he articulates a Foucauldian understanding of neoliberalism that can be seen as a specific mode of government rooted in economic discourses of competition (Foucault, 2008). The accentuation of the competitive forces shaping higher education, linked in Britain to periodic audits such as the RAE and the REF, have become increasingly visible within higher education institutions through techniques such as performance indicators and targets, the increasing role of non-academic managers, the adoption of line-management authority hierarchies, linked to strategic planning, quality assurance, annual appraisals and audits that now function as a regular part of university governance (Olssen & Peters, 2005) and which discipline the way academics 'conduct their conduct,' in Foucault's phrase. By drawing on various examples from Olssen's experience, it is argued that academics in neoliberalised institutions have been seriously deprofessionalised, the sources of which must be traced to complex causes 'in the whole network of the social' (Foucault, 1982, p. 345). Although this complexity of power is increasingly constraining, it is also suggested that it still offers some opportunities for academic resistance.

The summary of our conversations is presented in this article, aiming to address the ways in which neoliberalism has transformed academia. We argue that the replacement of traditional liberal collegial models of governance by neoliberal technologies has diminished the academic freedom and professional self-determination of academics within the university acting to the detriment of autonomous research endeavours and propelling an escalation of the 'dark times' so vividly depicted by Tamboukou (2012, p 860). In general terms, the article contributes to wider scholarly debate on neoliberalisation of higher education and academic work.

Mark Olssen is Professor of Political Theory and Education Policy in the Department of Politics at the University of Surrey. His philosophically inspired sociology is known worldwide, and it has brought him followers in the United Kingdom, New Zealand and globally. His work has supplemented postmodern philosophy by drawing on the work of Nietzsche, Foucault, Deleuze and others. He has also contributed to the understanding of the complexity theory and the ways systems interact and provide agency and structure. Perhaps most importantly, Olssen's writings have enhanced and

promoted the critique of 20<sup>th</sup> century liberal political theory in terms of its libertarian unconscious while developing a more communitarian political theory relevant to the global 21<sup>st</sup> century. His work on neoliberalism was originally set out in his early articles written in New Zealand, and in his book, written with John A Codd and Anne-Marie O'Neill, *Education Policy: Globalisation, Citizenship and Democracy*, published by Sage in 2004. His more recent and widely read books are *Liberalism, Neoliberalism, Social Democracy: Thin Communitarian Perspectives on Political Philosophy and Education* (2010), and *Toward A Global Thin Community: Nietzsche, Foucault, and the Cosmopolitan Commitment* (2009).

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**Rille Raaper:** Your writings have had a significant impact on my interests and thinking as an early career researcher. You have helped me to understand the ways neoliberal mode of government operates, and how it shapes the educational processes but also the lives of academics and students.

Let me start this interview by inviting you to reflect on the concept of neoliberalism. In many of your publications, you have critiqued neoliberalism – often based on a Foucauldian theorisation - and explained neoliberalism as a discourse, a form of governmentality, political and economic theories and models or even as a revolution (Olssen, 2004; Olssen, 2009; Olssen, Codd, O'Neill, 2004; Olssen & Peters, 2005). I am also aware of your significant work experience in academia and your past and present involvement in different university level committees, including your experience of being the Chair of the Academic Assembly at the University of Surrey. If you now think about your journey as a practising academic but also as someone who has extensively written about neoliberalism, how would you explain the concept of neoliberalism as it is present in higher education?

**Mark Olssen:** When I joined the university as a young academic, in the 1980s, it operated according to different norms and procedures; that is, the norms and targets tended to be set by the academics in the institutions. One thought of bodies such as Senate as having ultimate power, and Senates were of course dominated by academics. One was aware during this period, of course, that academics were being increasingly criticised in the community in the 1970s, in particular, for a lack of accountability, performance targets and a lack of control over work life. These criticisms were shaped in part by the same factors which caused a decline of the welfare state and led to the eclipse of the Keynesian demand management. In some instances, they were justified. Keynesian demand management had emphasised the professional groups such as doctors, lawyers, academics along with others, who should be in control of their own standards of works, performance targets and

disciplinary procedures. Such things as the oil crisis of the 1980s, and changes in demography had also placed the 'old' welfare state under pressure. With respect to higher education, as with health, and other public service areas of the economy, it was clear that the lack of structures of accountability and transparency served to reinforce public criticisms of groups like teachers, and academics and conflict with more recent societal pressures that were concerned about academics as being lazy, or as 'not doing a fair day's work for a fair day's pay'. The institution of 'sabbatical leave', for instance, was not simply unfortunately named, but had a very poor public reputation back then; it confused the public who wondered perhaps whether academics were taking a 'holiday' for a work which did not seem to be any harder than a work of a plumber or a carpenter.

Speaking at the level of theory, moreover, during the 1950s to 1970s, there was an extensive growth in theoretical work that aimed to redesign disciplines such as economics. This was to quite quickly start to filter through to journalists and began to inform public criticism. Social scientists such as Milton Friedman, Friedrich von Hayek, and James Buchanan were deeply critical of Keynesian demand management but also of the traditional ideas of the public good and professionalism. It is a mistake to see politicians, policy spokesman, and public activists as uninformed by academic scholarship. Margaret Thatcher was a keen enthusiast for writers such as Milton Friedman, and Friedrich von Hayek, and even invited academics like James Buchanan, the author of Public Choice theory to London in 1982. Academic writings which established the general frame of reference of neoliberalism, in economics, politics, and policy, were being established in the US and Europe from the 1930s. There was much work going on in Europe, around the ordo-liberals, such as Walter Eucken and Wilhelm Röpke, but also much in the US including Schumpeter, Simons, Becker, Buchanan, Friedman, Arrow, Nash, Williamson, to name but some. The groundwork was well prepared. When the change from Keynesian ideas to neoliberalism came, it brought with it fundamentally different assumptions not just about economics and policy, but also about history, the individual, human interest, trust, and professionalism. At one level neoliberalism expresses a class-based politics against welfare and redistribution, and on behalf of the rich. It asserts that individuals should be responsible for themselves, for better or for worse. This is the sense in which it promotes an enterprise society. It elevates the norm of competition as a dominant ordering frame of reference undergirding all of social life.

**RR:** Might not some agree with the neoliberals that many public sector 'professionals', of whom academics are one good example, were not in fact accountable or transparent in terms of what they did?

**MO:** Yes, I agree, such a view did, I think, strike a chord amongst public criticisms, and also amongst outside policy elites. Also, very obviously, it is a view held by many of those who are managers or administrators within universities. There is a sense in which it strikes a chord with all academics, in that many might claim to know those who 'don't pull their weight', don't work hard', are 'lazy', etc. There is a sense, indeed, in which I agree with it myself. Neoliberalism drew much of its initial popular appeal from sentiments already present within higher education and the public at large, that if individuals lived unchecked and unmonitored, they will cheat, and they would develop complex strategies for avoiding work and escaping responsibility. While in one sense, we can all agree there is a need for sensible standards of accountability, under neoliberalism, it is the particular way that accountability has been operationalised and enforced that is the problem. It has become a vehicle for an ongoing system of deprofessionalisation. It is linked from the outset to a dismantling of collegial academic power and for isolating and disempowering each individual academic. It starts with an untrusting view of human nature, as well as a normative view of self-responsibility, which denies the interdependent character of social life, at the depth of the core of its paradigm. Therefore, the neoliberal academic writings, initially from America, introduced new forms of market criteria, which in effect were quasi-market criteria like audits, appraisals, performance and incentive targets, bonus payments and a whole range of standards and controls which demonstrated a new way for reorganising the nature of work in public sector contexts, redefining professionalism, introducing authoritarian line-management structures, in order to render academics accountable in neoliberal terms. So, while we might all agree that some collegial systems of adequate accountability and transparency were necessary, in order that colleagues were treated fairly, under the neoliberals', accountability is directed and managed from outside of the academy and academics have progressively lost control over both the conditions of their work, and increasingly even the content of what they write.

Also, the norms started to shift in practice in 1970s and 1980s when this theoretical and economic discourse became dominant at the policy level - when the performance targets, audits, and criticisms towards academia gained political attention by politicians such as Margaret Thatcher, who became prime minister of the United Kingdom in the 1979, and with Ronald Reagan, who became the president of the United States of America in 1981. While it is difficult to draw the line where it actually happened precisely, politically it is convenient to identify the origins of this new settlement as occurring with the coming to power of the governments of Thatcher and Reagan. One can detect a sea change or a transition in a dominant social democratic paradigm or orthodoxy around this time. They were of course able to draw on a great deal of theoretical writing – in economics, management

and business studies, and other social science disciplines – which as I have commented had been circulating for some time.

What is clear, in fact, is that in order to understand the historical evolution of neoliberalism, particularly as a mode of government, one needs to explore a wide range of economic and political theories and developments dating back to as early as 1930s and 1940s. In this sense, you are right about my significant interest in Michel Foucault's work. I find his work a great resource in analysing and critiquing neoliberalism as it operates in the public sector: the ways in which neoliberal technologies of government are developed, how they act on people and shape new forms of self-interested subjects. For Foucault, neoliberalism operates not primarily as an economic framework, nor as a political theory, but centrally as a form of rationality that seeks to orientate, and explain, not just capitalism, or economic behaviour, or the political, but all areas of life. This has recently been reasserted by Dardot and Laval (2013) in their book *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, although it was also initially stated in *Education Policy: Globalisation, Citizenship, Democracy* (Olssen, Codd, O'Neill, 2004). It constitutes, as it were, a new order of common sense; a frame of reference beyond which thinking itself becomes problematic. Foucault expresses this view most forcefully in his 1978-1979 Lecture Course at the College de France, published originally, in French, in *Naissance de la biopolitique*, translated in English, in *The Birth of Biopolitics*. (Foucault, 2008).

**RR:** This understanding of neoliberalism as a mode of government that shapes us as subjects brings us closer to the issues of power in neoliberal academia. Being very much influenced by Foucault's work myself, I see power being fluid and difficult to track – 'at once visible and invisible, present and hidden, ubiquitous' (Foucault & Deleuze, 1977, p. 213). This is particularly in neoliberal contexts, where performance targets, quality assurance and auditing measures organise academic work rather than clear top-down orders – disciplinary and sovereign forms of power as Foucault would term it. Many authors (i.e. Lingard and Rawolle, 2009) argue that these new governing techniques in academia are based on New Public Management logic that emphasises strategic management (i.e. outcomes, indicator measures) characteristic of the private sector. You say at one point that 'the traditional professional culture of open intellectual enquiry and debate has been replaced with an institutional stress on performativity' (Olssen, 2009, p. 436). What are your thoughts on this in terms of power – how would you describe power in neoliberal universities as you have experienced it? And have these relations changed over time?

**MO:** Power has shifted away from the academics who had greater authority and control over the profession in the past. Perhaps they never completely controlled it, but they had a lot of say over

standards, performance reviews, evaluation and assessment, and they would do it according to standards which were well tested based on the academic canons and good practice over time. But we can also see, I think, that under neoliberalism power has shifted away from academics to a new group of external managers, as external policy elites started to have more say in higher education. Power is also, more than ever, located outside universities, in the agencies of business and the state. The inauguration of six yearly audits, initially the RAE, established under Thatcher, in 1986, and now the REF and the NSS, constitutes, as it were, 'external drivers', which constitute 'structural selectivities' (to use a phrase from Offe, 2004), gearing every university to compete for position in a hierarchy of endless competition. Because the context is a market context, this is a competition that not every university can win. The old, Russell Group universities have a clear advantage, on many grounds, and many of the newer, or less well-funded universities struggle to survive. As each university experiences the pressure; each intensifies the pressures on their staff; and disciplinary power is transmitted downwards onto academics who must perform or perish. While the power of academics has as a consequence of these processes diminished, especially in relation to the way their professional autonomy is defined, as well as the amount of work they were asked to do, the power and authority of non-academic or 'quasi-academic' 'managers' – registry staff, Pro-Vice-Chancellors and Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Vice-Chancellors, Executive Boards, and administrators – has increased. Increasingly, many of this group have never been academics, and many are drawn from the business community. They have under neoliberal governmentality increased their power, and their professional autonomy. It is this group, as opposed to academics, that have been more seriously 'professionalised' in recent times. (Kolsaker, 2014). This reflects New Public Management logic that was highlighted earlier. Being initially imperceptible process, or at least not easily understood or recognised by unsuspecting and largely uniformed academics, and others, it has expanded and developed in many different areas: the actual governance of universities, the way the universities were ruled and governed in terms of the governing Councils, and the ways universities were set up and run. This was a deliberate process, even if it was not publicly announced as a new policy, it was very actively pursued by Vice-Chancellors committees in most Western countries: in New Zealand, Australia, America and Britain along with others. As someone who has been some years in the Council at my own university and on the Finance Committee and other important central committees of the university, what I started to think of as the ripple effect is what Vice-Chancellors would bring back from the Vice-Chancellors' committees, operating at the national and even at the global level, would be the new standards and fashions of good practice. Establish Executive Boards; appoint more lay, business representatives to Council; apply to the Privy Council to 'deregulate' the Statutes; establish line-management systems; and so on. Thus, the requirements started to be very much directed from the centre, so Higher Education Funding Council for England and similar bodies in

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland would start to exert pressure and new types of practices for how governance should be altered. It has been quite systematic percolating through all the time. So to answer your question directly, power has shifted away from academics in that collegial governance by academics, through bodies such as senates, and statutory regulated committees being replaced by executive directives from the top through line-management hierarchies operating with the authority of executive boards, and the vice-chancellor of the institution. Given the pressures now exerted from outside agencies, regarding things like RAE, REF, and NSS, every university needs to 'run fast just to stand still'. This is leading, in turn, to far more aggressive management styles, and a marked escalation of bullying and heavy handed directives from management as they clamber to improve their league table rankings. So, in short, what is very clear is that there has been a marked increase in top-down power and centralisation in higher education governance – particularly from the perspective of various funding councils who have got increasing power over universities and the ways they operate.

As a footnote on this, it is worth noting an important point by Foucault here. For much of the argument he was making about the ordo-liberals in Germany was their recognition that unlike for classical liberalism, who saw laissez-faire and 'self-regulating free markets' as natural phenomena, part of a naturalistic order, neoliberalism as a form of governmentality was self-consciously understood, by these Germans at least, as the constructed rationality of the state. It was also a view maintained by James Buchanan, who criticised Hayek's conception of 'spontaneous order' on the grounds that he believed that economic efficiency would never emerge 'naturally' via laissez-faire but must be imposed by the state. As Buchanan says in *The Limits of Liberty*:

My basic criticism of F. A. Hayek's profound interpretation of modern history and his diagnosis for improvement is directed at his apparent belief or faith that social evolution will...ensure the survival of efficient institutional forms. Hayek is so distrustful of man's explicit attempts of reforming institutions that he accepts uncritically the evolutionary alternative. (1975: 194n)

Buchanan in this sense maintained a similar approach to the ordo-liberals. So one of Foucault's interests in the ordo-liberals and US liberals like Buchanan was to indicate that neoliberalism is essentially not a naturalistic thesis, but a top down, authoritarian discourse: neoliberalism is imposed from on high. In slightly polemical terms, he characterises neoliberalism as anti-democratic; if you like, a new form of 'fascism'. This signalled a major difference between classical and neoliberalism. You can see this 'directive', 'top down' aspect of neoliberalism in the new forms of governmentality implemented from the 1980s in universities. It gives a new significance to the notion of 'rule by



managers'; ultimately, of course, the power emanates directly from the state. The major levers are all imposed by the state, which itself responds to global interests. Collegial models of self-governance premised upon autonomous institutional spheres are replaced by 'top-down' managerial models, directed from the centre – the state and global capital. This also undermines universities semi-autonomous power within civil society, which is itself historically important in terms of understanding liberalism as a natural system of autonomy of spheres and free expression. Universities, as once-upon-a-time, a fifth estate, a critical bulwark for the safeguarding of democracy, are now in this new age of neoliberalism, rendered impotent against the powers of capitalism, superbly administered by the state. Everyone is too intent on watching their backs to speak of dissidence or serious critique in this age where even reasonable tenure is no longer vouchsafe. The assessment of 'impact' escalates this process, and seeks now to control and monitor the 'content' of what universities produce, in order to render knowledge production as 'useful' for the society. In this sense, it constitutes a very worrying 'sign' especially given the epistemic difficulties with the way it is assessed.

**RR:** You tend to be particularly critical about the exclusion of academics from the key governing bodies of the universities. Could you elaborate on that change? Perhaps you have some stories from your own experience to share?

**MO:** Well, I joined my present university when the Executive Board was first established and which decreased the influence and power of the Senate. The Senate was a body that had representatives from the academic community on it, and functioned traditionally as what could be called a 'collegial, quasi-democratic' governance body, but it has become almost a sideshow, which rubber stamps university policy, and has largely become irrelevant to the governance in the institution. The Executive Board became the key decision-making body; its authority was anything but representative. Essentially, it constituted the central operational committee in the line-management structure of the university. It tended to comprise the handpicked representatives of the Vice-Chancellor and the Council, and functioned as an essentially closed group, which meant that trade union, student or staff associations were not permitted representation. None of these groups had access to the committee which meant that university policy, including decisions regarding restructuring, could be carried out in secret. This is important because such groups represent important constituencies within the organisation and in doing so they have traditionally performed a vital democratic function in terms of a theory of cross-checking constituencies. This theory goes back to Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755) and John Locke (1632-1704) and is derivative from the doctrine of the 'separation of powers': the idea that power is safer if groups are being watched by groups of different interests and constituencies. Yet, today, it is these groups which are being

excluded from the newly constituted Executive Boards. In some universities, my own included, a significant percentage (nearly half) of the Executive Board had never worked as an academic, and even those who 'claimed' to be academics most were very distant academics, some having been academics a decade earlier, prior to becoming a Pro-Vice-Chancellor or pursuing a management or administrative role. This trend conflicts sadly with what I call the 'collegial-democratic' governance model where academics themselves were actively engaged in the governance of their universities. Such is the model that at the very end of last century was endorsed and supported by the 1997 *UNESCO Recommendation on the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel* where they state in clause 31 that:

Higher-education teaching personnel should have the right and opportunity, without discrimination of any kind, according to their abilities, to take part in the governing bodies and to criticize the functioning of higher education institutions, including their own, while respecting the right of other sections of the academic community to participate, and they should also have the right to elect a majority of representatives to academic bodies within the higher education institution. (UNESCO, 1997)

and also that:

32. The principles of collegiality include academic freedom, shared responsibility, the policy of participation of all concerned in internal decision-making structures and practices, and the development of consultative mechanisms. Collegial decision-making should encompass decisions regarding the administration and determination of policies of higher education, curricula, research, extension work, the allocation of resources and other related activities, in order to improve academic excellence and quality for the benefit of society at large. (UNESCO, 1997)

So, it is this 'collegial-democratic' model of governance through 'self-rule' that has today been supplanted by neoliberalism. In the UK today, most universities have implemented these new types of governance mechanisms. Universities are increasingly governed by non-academic managers and business leaders. The same trend has occurred in relation to University Councils, of course. While academic representation on Councils has diminished steadily over the last three decades, that of external 'lay advisors', comprising business leaders, and non-academic managers, has increased. It is little wonder that there is increased tension between academics and non-academics in universities in Britain. The upshot of all of this is that important policies concerning things like learning and teaching, research, and including the restructuring and redesigning of the institution, have been removed from any democratic scrutinisation or control by professionals and those who work in the institution, and subsumed under the 'managers' who have gained increasing power and whose own

behaviour is effectively insulated from scrutinisation or amendment by students or academics in the larger institutions. As Kolsaker's (2014) research has demonstrated, managers over the last thirty years have experienced increasing professionalization while academics have experienced the reverse.

So neoliberalism has deliberately 'deprofessionalised' public sector professionals, and certainly in universities this has been a slow deliberate and ongoing deprofessionalisation of academics to the extent now that they are meant to simply obey line management dictates – this is often through performance indicators and measurement. So in that sense, you asked me about power earlier; power has shifted from academics to managers; it has also shifted to stakeholders and the community, and in large part neoliberal reforms in the higher education sector were part and parcel with anti-intellectual sentiment present in the wider community. This is to say that such neoliberal policies relied upon anti-intellectual, anti-university sentiments. There was quite a lot of anti-intellectualism amongst the public at large and from ruling elites in the days of Thatcher, and the attacks on the universities at her time were made easier, or possible, by this. Hence, in the 1980s funding was cut quite a number of universities in Britain, and this was justified by appealing to the fact that universities wasted a great deal of public money. Or, by appealing to lax standards of accountability or transparency, it was said that the public were getting poor value from academics and universities. There were concerns in the popular imagination, fuelled by certain political elites, which I think fed into the neoliberal arguments and encouraged and made it possible for policies to be assumed by managers and business people and groups outside of the university.

**RR:** I heard you briefly mentioning students, that they have been excluded from university governance, along with academics. Naidoo and Williams (2015), Svensson and Wood (2007) among many others have argued that students are now positioned as consumers of higher education who purchase education as service. In this case, students could be seen as becoming self-interested customers in its economic meaning rather than active learners. What are your thoughts on how are students positioned within these new forms of power relations or techniques of governance?

**MO:** They still have a lot of power, potentially. I noticed their power when I was the Chair of the Academic Assembly. As the Chair, I had a statutory right to be on nearly every important committee in the university from the Finance Committee to the Council, the Senate, the University Court, and to all other committees of the university. Students were also represented on these committees and their voice was taken very seriously. I also realised that the students were potential allies of the academics, and on several issues I managed to get students' support much to the

disappointment of the university management who suddenly saw me as politicising students on certain key issues. I could point out that certain things were not right and once you highlighted these to students, they would often join the argument.

But yes, students were seen being important by the managers because they are important consumers, and if the students raise questions about whether disabled students were treated fairly in exams, what the supervision should be, how module evaluation questionnaire should operate, etc., the university was very sensitive to these matters. However, as I mentioned with reference to the Executive Boards earlier, I once wrote to my Vice-Chancellor asking if students and the Academic Assembly of the university could be represented on the Executive Board of the university. He was not keen on that idea at all and wrote a letter back explaining that to me. In addition, although I had a statutory right to attend a large number of committees, the university employed lawyers to apply to the Privy Council to 'deregulate' on two occasions during or after my tenure as an office-holder with the Academic Assembly. During this time, they successfully applied to remove clauses from the statutes concerning the structure and constitution of university committees, employment regulations and rights, and ultimately, concerning the academic assembly itself. This 'deregulation' substantially tilted power further toward management. I recall vividly that on the day that the successful decision was received from the Privy Council, the University took immediate steps to abolish a particular committee that was statutorily constituted to represent diverse constituencies across the university, and to 'reconstitute' it as a closed sub-committee of the executive board within the line-management structure of the institution.

To my mind, given that universities are in highly important senses, public bodies, that they are being restructured along the lines of private businesses, at least in relation to their models of governance, is highly questionable. It is fair to say, too, that league table' competition across the sector is a major source of employee discontent and its escalation. It constitutes the reason why most of the recent conflict and tension that is now evident in university politics is coming from the academics rather than students, or at least more than students. While students are potentially an important constituency, the university sector for the most part thinks that they can control and contain the input of students, rendering student discontent politically harmless. In this sense, students have not challenged the political direction of university reform and restructuring to date, bar one or two protests over the provision of student fees. But, even when they have challenged changes to the fees regime through their political organisations, they have for the most part short-lived and for the most part lost. Most students are probably resigned to seeing the only possibility of change as being through a political settlement. They are not assisted because the electorate is divided on the issues

of fees. There is no overwhelming consensus which sees the present 'user-pays' fees regime as inherently unjust. While some regard student fees as a new way of making taxation 'progressive', in the sense that it taxes those more who will benefit from education, this is actually an unintended effect of the neoliberal agenda. From a neoliberal perspective, 'user-pays' is a consequence of the need by the state to cut the social costs of reproduction in order to make 'low-tax' policies possible. Such policies enable the state to continue to underwrite policies for necessary skills and human capital while not having to directly pay for them. Politicians can thus consider they are developing policies for 'globalisation' while maintain a 'lean' state. For their part, universities will go quite a long way to placate student demands; they do not want students critiquing the broader policy framework in which they operate.

**RR:** In my own doctoral research, I explored the ways the neoliberalisation of higher education – particularly the changes in university governance – affect(s) the educational processes such as student assessment. I was interested in how assessment policy has been neoliberalised, the ways it shapes academics' and students' experience of their work and studies. Based on my study (see Raaper, 2015), I can argue that academics feel highly threatened by neoliberal reforms, and they have become increasingly constrained academic subjects. That being said, I also noticed some meaning-making process and covert forms of policy negotiation: so called 'pockets of freedom' in neoliberal academia (Peters and Olssen, 2005, p. 47). What are your thoughts on how academic work and subjectivity have changed in neoliberal universities? I know you mentioned that power has shifted from academics to managers in terms of university governance, but are there any other worrying developments at the micro level of academic work and subjectivity?

**MO:** Staff are aware of the way the neoliberal agenda is restructuring everything from teaching practices to staff expectations on other staff. In many universities now you turn up to Open Days, you turn up to staff functions for parents of prospective students, you make yourself available to interview prospective students who are thinking about coming to the university. This is all of course a part and parcel of being a good professional, and it is therefore legitimate. At the same time, however, under neoliberal governmentality the expectations on staff have constantly risen. More and more they have been required to become their own secretaries and administrators. Administration through the use of the internet, as well as the constant introduction of changes, places them under increasing pressures. If you add these administrative and secretarial expectations to the new demands with regard to research, then academia is becoming very pressured indeed. I also think that in the last Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK, there was a tendency in most universities, who are serious about the competition, to send staff research out to external

examiners to be rated. It was a very difficult process, and it caused people to leave their career; it caused people mental illness; it caused people very serious stress to find that their publications were not going to be returned in the REF; and it caused a huge amount of tension. Now they are talking of sending all research out for external assessment as it is completed, year by year. At one level, this has already raised issues concerning methodology and competence. Most universities have appointed only one expert per discipline. How can one person represent the huge variety of perspectives, even rival paradigms, competently? And what does 'external examining' actually mean in this context? Are they assessing cold, from scratch, or as is the case with one university studied, merely confirming validations completed by REF officials internal to the academics own university. To what extent does paradigm or departmental politics distort the epistemological and methodological neutrality and authoritativeness of such a process? Most universities don't have the time or inclination to take such issues seriously. There are other problems as well. Certain people who had specialised on things like text books found that they were not considered REFable. Universities are even adopting policies to replace staff that are not REFable, and at some universities they implement so called 'capability proceedings' which start with your discussion with a head of your department who sets you targets, i.e. sending your articles to and getting published in Q1 journals, i.e., top ten journals, and then becomes more serious after the poor, 'unperforming' academic fails to achieve them. It is one solution that some universities are applying; it increases stress enormously and it causes - which they want and expect - staff to resign from their positions and seek jobs elsewhere. So staff are being replaced at the great rate, staff are being put on teaching only contracts if they are not REFable. So in this sense it has become incredibly competitive for those who succeed in the academic game and that is in a sense unfair because these staff were appointed at one point in their careers; they set the norms and the goals back then. In a way, the institutionalisation of the REF, for example, is setting the bar far too high given the amount of remuneration paid out to academics. The concentration on auditing also applies to teaching, as well as research. If you cannot teach, you are also likely of being earmarked for 'capability proceedings', and that is leading to terminations of contracts as well. So yes, I would agree that neoliberalism – particularly the ways in which it is now starting to operate in universities – reshapes academics as subjects. They are becoming increasingly 'hounded' and 'pressurised' subjects who are being forced to pre-set objectives imposed by their institutions - research excellence (articles submitted to Q1 journals), teaching excellence (as assessed by Module Evaluation Questionnaires and the National Student Survey), and excellence in terms of income generation (through funded bids to research granting bodies). It is a different type of academic subject that neoliberalism is producing. It is all logically derivative from the spiral of competition that the auditing process inaugurates. From a Foucauldian perspective, this would go

back to the idea of power that now operates through various performance and management measures that make academics act in an institutionally desired way.

One further point here, if what I am describing is sounding Orwellian, for those who perform poorly in the REF, or fail to bring in funding, matters can get rapidly worse. If articles in the higher education trade press are a guide, universities have featured in recent stories for 'pressuring' academic staff with regard to funding for research, or for poor performance with respect to teaching or research. Many universities regularly engage also in what can only be called 'general' restructuring employed to 'save money' where particular departments or schools adjudged to have performed poorly on the REF have been 'singled out'. Another typical strategy of universities utilising restructuring is by justifying them financially on the grounds of a need to save money and tying them to specific targets to lose a certain number of positions. There is a very large elephant in the room of course. Restructuring is highly prone to what can be termed conjointing behaviour. By this I am referring to the multiple motivations employed before certain persons are marked to leave employment because the operationalisation of restructuring decisions are left to personal at the local level. While senior management may intend restructuring in a purely impartial and rational sense, on legitimate grounds, it would seem that when operationalised at Faculty or Departmental level, by persons acting at those levels, whose positions are saved, versus whose are to go, reflects all manner of 'subjective', and 'personalistic' criteria. Having been restructured some seven times in the last fourteen years, I am significantly cynical as to the multiple motivations operating in restructuring decisions. The technology should be banned, or at least severely regulated, in public sector organisations.

**RR:** I am not trying to oppose you in any way, but do you think that restructuring academic work over time and increasing academic accountability is utterly negative? For example, I have argued elsewhere (Raaper, 2015) that recent regularisation of educational processes such as assessment might help to transform traditional power imbalances that have existed in favour of the academic over the students. In other words, neoliberal emphasis on scrutiny and transparency might actually help to avoid putting students 'under the thumb of a professor who abuses his authority' (Foucault, 1984, p. 299).

**MO:** I am not saying that I am against all forms of accountability, or for that matter, transparency. The neoliberal doctrine of 'provider capture' contributes constructively with respect to how viva voce exams are organised, for instance, and the (perfectly sensible) decision to exclude the supervisor from being one of the examiners. While that is good, in many other contexts, the doctrine

of 'provider-capture' is confused and ineffective. For instance, in the RAE/REF, the continued dominance of peer review by academics, who constitute the appointed members of the UOAs panels, clearly fails to eradicate the downsides of professional capture that neoliberalism claimed to address. On the issue of accountability, however, the neoliberals' clearly struck a chord, which is why their initial programme gained widespread public support. The early neoliberals argued for across the board assessment and appraisal of individuals to ensure that academia had not become a den of slothful indolence and wasteful public spending. Laurie Taylor played his part, no doubt, in satirising academics as being likely, or capable, of squandering public resources, and going slow on research. Some form of checking is certainly appropriate, but you asked me specifically about the effects of neoliberalism. And, under neoliberalism, it seems that the drivers of the competition fetish are purely market criteria in what is an endlessly spiralling competition without limits. What is competing here? That in itself is interesting. The 144 UK universities have effectively been thrown together in a frenzy of competition, where some will win, some will barely survive, and some will clearly loose. Under such circumstances, the effects on the stress levels of academics are likely to be extreme. Just the other day, the Times Higher Education revealed that a senior academic committed suicide, and afterwards, his colleagues released email communications from senior management revealing the extreme pressure he was being put under to obtain research funding<sup>1</sup>.

So putting these together, the new norms and expectations over teaching, increased expectations over funded research, and new norms over quality publications are all increasing the stress on academics enormously, and one of the big issues in academia concerns the consequences of neoliberalism on academics' emotional lives and well-being and their senses of professional identity. What is happening is that universities are turning into highly competitive places where staff distrust other staff; where collegiality and cooperation are seen as sideshows, or as something that, if you are doing extremely well, you might have just a little bit of time to put into, but otherwise the place will not be for that. Neoliberalism engineers low trust environments, which means that the way the competition is being engendered in the academy is turning staff into enemies of other staff. Indeed, one of the biggest implications of the neoliberal revolution concerns the emotional consequences on staff, on job satisfaction, on morale, on personal stress, and on the ability for staff to cope with ever increasing workloads and ever increasing and unrealistic expectations. I think the way neoliberal revolution is affecting emotionality and professional deportment constitutes an important underexplored consequence of neoliberalism. While certainly different universities differ, many academics are on a razor-edge in terms of stress; you no longer need alarm clocks to get up in the

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<sup>1</sup> The death of Imperial College Professor Stefan Grimm; see Parr, C. (2014).



mornings because people are waking up on 'auto-cue' with long lists of what they have to do every day and that is becoming the norm for how professionals and the public institutions are running. I would therefore say that neoliberal change does not only aim for transparency and quality of academic practices, but it affects academic identities and the ways in which we understand academic work. The key problem, it seems to me, is that neoliberal policies are not intelligently framed or 'geared' to any concept of the public good, but have been developed solely in response to market levers as shaped by the endless competition generated by 'league table position' as a proxy for funding potential and student attraction. This is the game that nearly all vice-chancellors are playing.

**RR:** Subjects from a Foucauldian perspective are in a constant process of being produced (Butler, 1997). For Foucault (1997), this process is not utterly oppressive, but it includes opportunities for resistance and the technologies of the self. Going back to your point on emotional unhappiness in academia and frustration that academics increasingly experience, both regarding their research and teaching work, have you noticed any signs of growing resistance among those who are unhappy?

**MO:** So what does one do you ask, well, there are lots of ways, you can refuse, that is an ultimate thing and that is likely to get you into trouble. The line management can dismiss the staff member for refusing to comply with orders from the line. You have to do what your head of the department prescribes, as long as they are doing so within the law and what is called being reasonable. Alas not all heads are reasonable. Line-management models and Agency theory seem to assume a purely rational world devoid of real-world antagonisms, paradigm wars, personality conflicts and 'pay backs' which everyone knows sometime characterises life, and academia, especially as stress increases. However, 'being reasonable' is relative to the pressures, and the demands and these as I have said, have increased. So people are adopting sort of strategies of mutual accommodation and connivance between colleagues based on trust amongst subgroups perhaps. Many academics I am sure are experienced survivors. Neoliberalism paradoxically is generating self-organising critical subcultures based upon coping with, if not entirely resisting, the excesses of the administrative paradigm. But I laugh when I read educational sociologists talking about 'refusal', or 'active resistance', and so on. Those types of strategies would only result in losing one's job. The reality is that many are leaving and only the brightest and best who can jump through all the various hoops laid out for them are surviving. My own strategy, as Chair of the Academic Assembly, was to act as thoroughly professional, but to try to confront every issue of importance as best as possible. As Chair of the Academic Assembly, my policy was to voice on committees and write letters actively opposing restructuring, and seeking to hold the university to account for fair and lawful conduct. At times I even saw myself as a 'specific intellectual,' in Foucault's sense, acting

within a 'specific site', 'speaking truth to power'. I took the view that so long as one does so professionally one should survive. And by and large, I did. Not without considerable trepidation, however. So, there are different courses open to academics. How successful they are likely to be is another matter. It is not easy. By and large, people, myself included, do not 'speak truth to power'. It is the most difficult thing in the world, if one values having a job in the first place. For example, Vice Chancellor's get far too much by way of salary right across the western world, yet whenever the subject came up on Council, not a single person of the thirty-odd Council members dared to speak on the matter. The real response, and the eventual change, will come, I think, at a political level, when hopefully universities are once again established as autonomous centres of enquiry and research freed from the constraints of externally imposed performative audits.

**RR:** It could be then argued that neoliberalism with its new techniques of governance produces pressurised academic subjects who are perhaps afraid of resisting and refusing policy developments but who still find ways for manoeuvring within the changed university contexts, Related to that, I am aware that you have been recently questioning the possibilities for higher education beyond neoliberal policies and neoliberal systems of reasoning. I would like to conclude our conversation by asking you the question that you have posed to yourself in several of your talks, recently also at the Theory and Method Seminar in the University of Glasgow, 1<sup>st</sup> October, 2014 - what lies beyond neoliberalism for higher education? Is there a new settlement on the horizon?

**MO:** Well, I think what will constrain free market competition, is increasing inequality in higher education and in society more broadly. The access for working class children to higher education is extremely poor overall under this new regime, and although there is a parallel requirement for universities to introduce scholarships and auxiliary funding for underprivileged or disabled students, the numbers being introduced really constitute no more than a sop. They are not going to amount to anything called social reform. While social reform was being made with policies like widening participation, most of these neoliberal reforms are actually concerned with the individual competition between universities that facilitate their league table positions in the national hierarchy. As a consequence, this new mode of governing universities and the public sector is derailing policies like widening participation which is now becoming something of a joke. It tends to get bracketed as something that is on the agenda but is not actually being taken seriously. It is like climate change in this sense. I have sat on hundreds of committees where matters to do with 'widening participation' and directives from the state on climate change (such as changing the heaters) are simply postponed 'for another time'. As for the effects on inequality, which I spoke of above, we are going back perhaps to the 18th century where you are getting the emergence of very

privileged elite. Higher education is contributing to this, but neoliberalism within the economy generally has hugely increased inequality. The production of inequality, in education, as in wealth distribution, is the major contradiction of neoliberalism. In higher education, the inegalitarian drivers can be seen very directly. Those who are entering the universities now need to have two As and a B, or in many areas three As, which means that you are already very privileged and successful. One way of climbing the league tables is to attract brighter and more successful students. Most universities now have deliberate policies of elevating the entry grades, discipline by discipline. These students are coming, as we know based on the research, from very privileged and successful families. Higher education is tending to stratify the social structure once again along the lines of class and privilege. If it has not become very obvious yet, I think it will within the next ten or twenty years.

What is also likely to constrain higher education is the conservative implications neoliberalism has for student curriculum choice, which means that lots of areas of curriculum and lots of academics from Classics, Philosophy, not to mention all the new so called progressive paradigms of Gender Studies, Media Studies and Culture Studies, are all going by the board. In fact, the Natural Sciences such as pure Maths, and some forms of Physics and Chemistry are also having difficulties in recruiting students because students are now very careful in choosing their courses, so as to be relevant for their intended careers. Students, for the most part, are going to choose in agreement with their parents, and the broader families, and their parents are not going to want them to do subjects like Classics or even Philosophy; they want them to get the meal ticket. To some extent, higher education used to be seen as a liberal education prior to your decision what you are going to do in life; it was a good time to learn how to live; it was a good time to participate in democracy or at least practice at democracy. It was a good time to read widely, and it was prior to career involvement and engagement. However, if you are spending 9000 pounds per year for your studies, you do not want to waste your money. It is probably a 'false paradise' and obviously based upon imperfect information, but students think it is true when they are making their choices.

Finally, I think that neoliberalism is already being modified and limited by new material crises: from the 'credit-crunch' and the economic recession of 2008 - 2010, to climate change, nuclear and other forms of terrorism, population growth, and to Ebola and other health risks. Ultimately, the threat to collective security and global stability is constituting pressures for political guidance and regulation of the economy generally, as well as in institutions like education, health and higher education. These are also contradictions of neoliberalism which, like inequality, and economic stagflation and crisis call for greater regulation and control by the state, and by global agencies. History has already been reasonably back and forward between the free market and the welfare state from the 18<sup>th</sup> century

onwards. So you have the very same pendulum, which gives you the swing from the conservative to labour, and is the force that will cater the swing back towards more socially egalitarian and political settlement. It will happen at some point in the future, when that will be I am not sure. People thought that after the 'credit crunch' and the recession from 2008 – 2010 that this might witness the demise of the neoliberalism, but indeed it has not signalled the demise of neoliberalism in most areas, especially in higher education. However, it is these collective pressures and material changes, including growing inequality, which will ultimately put 'the breaks' on neoliberalism and bring us back to sanity and a new social democratic consensus. In this sense, neoliberalism is not, in my view, to use a phrase by Andrew Gamble (2014) a 'crisis without end'.

So in terms of the overall effects, I think when it is appreciated that higher education once more is becoming very unequal, and that the policy on 'widening participation' is standing still, or going backwards, hopefully the state will ask what is happening and why universities are acting in the way they are. They may get cost-effectiveness but they pay a heavy price. They are acting in the way they are because the state has framed and unleashed the group of policies which causes universities to act in a market competition with each other, and only when that market competition is seen to have negative effects on social, political and educational policy generally will there be any pressure actually to move backwards and rethink. When that time comes, I am not sure. However, it is necessary to be optimistic; you have to have faith that the criticisms against neoliberalism at some stage will translate into some sort of urgent material crisis. They do not have to be the sort of revolutions that Marx predicted but there will be minor revolutions that cause the shift in settlement and operational policy orientation towards slightly different direction.

## **Acknowledgments**

We wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful and encouraging feedback.

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